

A Survey of the Critical Reception of the Harry Potter Series

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A person who types “Harry Potter” into the search box on Amazon.com will get approximately 216,500 items: books, movies, clothing (including costumes), jewelry, fine art collectibles, cell phone accessories, wands, room décor, Lego building sets, jigsaw puzzles, music and musical instruments, video games—from twenty-eight Amazon departments, ranging from “Books” to “Pet Supplies” (the “Expecto Patronum” dog feeding mat, for example) and “Tools and Home Improvement” (the “Lumos Nox” switch plate cover). Eliminating all the selections except “Books” narrows the list to about 16,000 items. Turning to more traditional research methods only adds to the abundance: searching “Harry Potter” in Gale Research’s *One Search* database at the end of 2014 returns over 100,000 hits, including over 65,000 news items, more than 20,000 magazine articles, 2,114 articles in scholarly journals, and 197 books. Obviously, a reader hoping to learn something about the critical reception of the books needs assistance sorting through the bounty of words about Harry Potter by authors other than J. K. Rowling.

Critical Reputation: A Primer

As this is a volume intended primarily for undergraduate and advanced high school students, it may be useful to discuss how critical reputation is assessed. Who are the players in the overall act of assessing a book, and what are their roles? What is the difference between a book critic and a literary scholar?

Even before a book is released, the publisher (Bloomsbury or Scholastic, in the case of Harry Potter) develops a marketing plan that includes sending out advance copies to people in a position to recommend books to others, especially if they will recommend them

to large audiences in a publication such as a newspaper, magazine, or journal. Publishers provide free copies to these publications.

Reviewers generally fall into two categories. Some are staff members at newspapers or magazines (print, online, or both) and usually have at least an undergraduate degree in a field involving writing, such as journalism or English; they may also have expertise in a certain area and write reviews about that area, such as food or film. If they are specifically assigned to write reviews, they may write many each month. A well-known and well-respected writer at a major publication can really boost a book's sales with a positive review. In July 2014, former *Roanoke Times* reporter Beth Macy published her first book, *Factory Man*. The book got much attention early on, and Macy got a number of national interviews because of high praise from *New York Times* reviewer Janet Maslin, who wrote in her summer books survey, "Early warning: 'Factory Man' (coming July 15) is an illuminating, deeply patriotic David vs. Goliath book. They give out awards for this kind of thing" ("When the Water's Too Cold").

Although scholars also write reviews sometimes, their work has less impact on a book's success because scholarly reviews are seldom published close to the time of the book's publication; scholars usually write for professional journals published one, two, or four times a year. Scholars have graduate degrees (a master's and perhaps also a doctorate) and are generally asked to review new books only in their specific areas of expertise. Of greater significance than their reviews is the original writing scholars produce, based on their own research questions; just as a medical researcher might examine tissue samples to look for the presence of a particular disease, a literary researcher might examine a book to look for the presence of certain ideas or patterns. Writing based on this research is called literary scholarship or literary criticism, although "criticism" in this context can be misleading. To say that a scholar writes literary criticism does not mean that he or she only makes negative comments about a book; rather, it suggests that the scholar makes a thorough examination of a text with a goal in mind, such as discussing what attitudes toward slavery Mark Twain includes in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Combining the work of many literary scholars writing about the same book (or series) can help to determine its overall value.

Artistic works, including books, are judged according to two criteria: literary quality and popularity. Quality evaluations involve scholarly criteria and are generally made by experts, and assessments of popularity involve everyone who buys, reads, or recommends a book. In addition to reviews, criteria used to determine quality include awards and prizes given by boards and organizations, most private, and based on a pre-established set of criteria (such as the aspects of literature taught to students in a literature course). In the United States, the major literary awards are the Pulitzer prizes, which are awarded in a variety of categories (some non-literary) and the National Book Awards. In the United Kingdom, major literary awards include the Man-Booker Prize, the British Book Awards (or “Nibbies”), and the Costa (formerly Whitbread) Award. For the most part, these awards and prizes are qualitative measures of a book’s success, but some, such as the Costa Award, also take into account a book’s popularity.

Lists of notable books are usually measures of popularity when they are based exclusively on sales or polls of readers. (They may also be compiled by reviewers; Janet Maslin compiles a “Best Books of” list at the end of every year.) Lists are usually published by organizations and publications, and the most prestigious such list in North American publishing is the *New York Times* Bestseller lists, for which books are chosen in several categories. On special occasions, an organization or publication may compile a special list, such as the Modern Library list of Top 100 Books of the Twentieth Century, released at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹ (“100 Best Novels”). In a contrast of qualitative and populist assessments, Modern Library compiled both a list voted on by its editorial board and a list selected by readers. The board selected Irish writer James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as its top selection, while readers chose Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand had three novels in the top ten of the reader’s list; *Ulysses* was number eleven. No Ayn Rand novel appeared on the editorial board’s top one hundred (“100 Best Books”).

Another group of people who influence a book's reputation are those who put books in readers' hands or recommend them, including librarians, teachers, and bookstore employees. In the reader study discussed by Colette Drouillard elsewhere in this volume, all three of these groups had played roles in introducing Harry Potter to young readers, although not to the same degree as family and friends. This category reflects measures of both quality and popularity, as teachers, librarians, and book store employees have opinions about books shaped by both sets of criteria and may also have varying levels of expertise. They may read reviews or the recommendations of professional organizations such as the American Library Association, but they also pay attention to book lists and to what young readers are buying or borrowing.

Thus, a critical reputation is a stew containing ingredients from many sources, some experts and some not. What, then, are the elements of the Harry Potter series' critical reputation?

The Role of Children

In June 1997, Bloomsbury released the first press run of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*: 500 books, 300 of which went to libraries. In July 2000, *Goblet of Fire* was launched with a press run of 1.5 million in hardback in the United Kingdom and 3.9 million in the United States (Brown). What is interesting about this difference is that the groundswell of popularity the series experienced in those three years did not come initially from the press or from book communities (that is, reviewers, librarians, teachers). It came, instead, from child- and young adult readers who noticed that there was something special about Harry. One reader of particular note was Alice Newton, whose father was chairman of Bloomsbury Publishing when Rowling's agent, Christopher Little, dropped off a sample of Harry Potter in June 1996. Little had taken on Rowling as a client after his young assistant, Bryony Evans, had read the three-chapter sample, laughing regularly (McGinty). By the time it came to Bloomsbury, the sample had been rejected by eight to twelve other publishers.² Eight-year-old Alice went to her room and came back a short while later "glowing." She said, "Dad,

this is so much better than anything else,” and she continued to nag him about reading more of Harry Potter’s story (“Revealed”). Aware that his Bloomsbury colleague Roger Cunningham³ was compiling a portfolio of fantasy books by new authors, Nigel Newton made his best business investment ever: he wrote a check to Joanne Rowling for two-thousand-five-hundred pounds—at the time, about \$4000 (“Revealed”).

Alice Newton was not alone in her enthusiasm for Harry Potter. In 1997, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* was selected for the gold medal in the nine- to eleven-year-olds category of the Nestlé Smarties Prize—an award based on children’s votes. In 1998, it won every major British award selected by children (Eccleshare). Significantly, Drouillard, explains, identification with the protagonist was an enormous factor in the appeal of the Harry Potter series: “This group of young readers had the singular opportunity to grow up at approximately the same pace and in the same time period as Harry Potter and his friends” (Drouillard). The study reflects that well over 80 percent of young readers said they both were influenced to read the books by friends and family and, in turn, recommended the books to other friends and family members. In some cases, readers picked up a book after observing another young person absorbed in reading it. So strong was the peer influence as Harry Potter fandom swelled that British booksellers timed the 1999 release of *Prisoner of Azkaban* for 3:45 p.m. to prevent eager young readers from skipping school to get it (Cowell). (With the publication of *Goblet of Fire*, the release moved permanently to weekends.)

Of course, the endorsement of adults—especially those in positions of authority where literature is concerned—helped to fan the flames already ignited by young enthusiastic readers.

Reviews of the Harry Potter Novels

In what is perhaps the first published review of a Harry Potter novel, Lindsey Fraser wrote in *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh) two days after the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* that Rowling “uses classic narrative devices with flair and originality and delivers a complex and demanding plot in the form of a first-rate

thriller. She is a first-rate writer for children” (qtd. in Nel 53). *The Herald* (Glasgow) wrote, “I have yet to find a child who can put it down.” Reviews in the London papers *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Mail on Sunday*, and *The Financial Times* were also very positive, and *The Sunday Telegraph* called it “a terrific book” (Eccleshare). *The Times* (also London) reviewer described Rowling as “a sparkling new author brimming with delicious ideas, glorious characters and witty dialogue” (Johnson). It was clear from these early reviews that Rowling was off to a fine start at home.

By the time Harry Potter “crossed the pond,” the first volume of his adventures was already a celebrated book, thanks largely to its having garnered major British prizes and turned up on impressive lists. The groundswell of support that had begun with child readers only grew as American reviewers got their hands on *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the name having been changed (with Rowling’s endorsement) because her American editor, Arthur A. Levine, felt that the word “philosopher” would be ineffective with young American readers.⁴ In an often-quoted review in the *New York Times*, Michael Winerip lauds the book and its author. Winerip calls Harry “a terrific person we’d love to have for a best friend” and says that Rowling “has a gift for keeping the emotions, fears and triumphs of her characters on a human scale, even while the supernatural is popping out all over.” Winerip recognizes similarities between Harry’s creator and Roald Dahl, the best-loved British children’s author immediately before Rowling; Dahl had died in 1990. Like many reviewers, Winerip finds Rowling’s use of humor particularly Dahlian: “Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox—points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers” (Rowling, qtd. in Winerip). The review also reflects an important reason for the book’s initial success when Winerip compares Harry’s anxiety as a Hogwarts novice to his own first day at Harvard thirty years earlier, amid classmates fresh from elite boarding schools. As M. Katherine Grimes has noted, it is the “Real Boy” with whom readers connect.

An interesting aspect of the American critical reception is the time gap between the publication of *Sorcerer’s Stone* and the

appearance of reviews in the places where good reviews are most coveted. In the first six months or so, reviews appeared primarily in publications devoted to children's literature or libraries. These were positive, but appeared in sources with narrow circulation, such as *School Library Journal* and *Cooperative Children's Book Center Choices*. In his assessment of the book's reception in the *20th Century American Bestsellers* database, Jordan Brown writes,

[T]he book in these early reactions was judged as spectacular within the framework of children's fantasy literature, and the initial reviews, while overwhelmingly positive, seem to have a slight condescension about them typical of children's literature reviews, not praising or critiquing those elements of plot and characterization so vital to adult fiction.

The late response of mainstream book critics may reflect hesitation about embracing a book wildly successful with child readers; although Rowling has claimed that she began writing without a target audience, Bloomsbury certainly accepted it with an audience of child fantasy readers in mind, and Arthur A. Levine (who bought the US rights) works for Scholastic, one of the primary American publishers of children's books. Perhaps it simply took a while for grown-up book critics to get on board the Hogwarts train. Not before late 1998 did reviews began appearing in places such as the *New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*. By early 1999, the floodgates had opened, and praise for Harry Potter appeared almost everywhere.

Around the time of *Chamber of Secrets*' US publication on June 20, 1999, the Harry Potter phenomenon took a much more commercial turn when Warner Brothers bought the film rights to the series. The second book debuted in the top spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and when *Prisoner of Azkaban* debuted in the United States three months later, the books held the top three spots (Sept. 8). By spring 2000, the books had been on the *NYT* fiction bestsellers list for twenty weeks and were still in the top five positions. Frustration mounted among major publishers whose titles were pushed down (or off), and *Goblet of Fire* was due out in July, so the newspaper finally created a "Children's Bestsellers" list. As

popularity grew, the critical reception became slightly more varied. As Philip Nel has observed, “Either the growing popular appeal of the series was beginning to make some critics more skeptical, or the hype beginning to surround the books was raising expectations” (*J. K. Rowling’s* 55). Rowling herself was so concerned about living up to the hype that she submitted the *Chamber of Secrets* manuscript on time, then took it back for six weeks of revision (Sexton 77–78).

Although many reviewers considered *Chamber of Secrets* as strong as its predecessor, notices for the novel were more likely to contain a “but” accompanying the near-universal praise. The book was “slightly less magical” wrote Michael Dirda in the *Washington Post* (maybe because the concept was no longer new). *But* the plot was very similar to the first book, based on a secret hidden under the Hogwarts School. This was a complaint of Graeme Davis, who also felt that the climactic scene where Fawkes rescues and heals Harry is a *deus ex machine*⁵ or contrived resolution; how, for example, would Fawkes know where to find Harry? (Davis wrote nine years later that he considered *Chamber* the weakest book in the series.) And some reviewers continued to find the books derivative of earlier British adolescent fiction, such as the work of Enid Blyton. Others raised content-based concerns: Mary Stuart said that some episodes were too frightening for younger readers, while Tammy Nezol found elements of the book disturbing, including Harry’s withholding information from Dumbledore and the human-like behavior of the mandrakes, which herbology students were perceived as slaughtering. One begins to suspect that reviews had been so positive that some reviewers were digging for minor quibbles, perhaps to demonstrate their own powers of discernment.

No other content-based objections to the Harry Potter series rose to the level of the response from some conservative Christians, mostly in the United States. These objections focus, of course, on the practice of wizardry and witchcraft, with detractors citing passages in Leviticus that they claim expressly condemn sorcery. The groundswell of this objection came just before the July 2000 publication of *Goblet of Fire*; *Newsweek* published the first chapter as part of a cover story called “Here’s Harry!” and reported that the

books had been challenged in at least twenty-five school districts in seventeen states (Jones). But it was not an exclusively American campaign. Three months before the publication of *Goblet of Fire*, a Church of England primary school banned the first three books outright, the head teacher maintaining that “devils, demons, and witches are real and pose the same threat as, say, a child molestor” (Knight). And in September 2000, a Canadian school superintendent sent all 100 elementary schools in his system guidelines concerning the use of Harry Potter novels in the classroom (Jones). The most objective account of this crusade is “Hunting Down Harry Potter” by Kimbra Wilder Gish, a fifth-generation conservative Christian who describes, but does not endorse, the arguments. Undeniably, the publicity surrounding this controversy had a “forbidden fruit” effect with some readers, including young readers who reported to some school librarians that they had to read Harry Potter novels at school because they were not allowed to read them at home.

If some critics found fault with *Chamber of Secrets*, a controversy concerning *Prisoner of Azkaban* really drew out the Harry Potter detractors. The novel was a contender for the prestigious Whitbread, along with Irish poet (and Nobel laureate) Seamus Heaney’s translation of *Beowulf*. Just before the award, *Independent* (London) critic Philip Hensher expressed dismay that a children’s book—as he saw it—would even be considered for a serious literary prize. Acknowledging the series’ benefits in encouraging reading, Hensher nevertheless announced that the Harry Potter phenomenon “is all getting seriously out of hand.” Considering *Prisoner of Azkaban* for a major literary prize, to Hensher, represents “the infantilisation of adult culture, the loss of a sense of what a classic really is.” Those who would put Rowling’s novel in the same class as Heaney’s *Beowulf* should “grow up,” he asserted (Hensher). Citing Hensher’s remarks, William Safire of the *New York Times* called the Whitbread Award to Heaney “a relief,” arguing that the Harry Potter series lacks levels of deeper meaning that draw adults to fiction intended for younger readers, such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Of Harry Potter generally, Safire declares, “prizeworthy culture it ain’t; more than a little is a waste of adult time.”

Nevertheless, many prominent critics weighed in with praise for *Prisoner*. The Cooperative Children's Book Center reviewer said that Rowling was getting better with every volume, and both the *School Library Journal* and *USA Today* reviewers concurred that Rowling was "three for three." In each volume, Rowling introduced inventive new devices that drew reviewers' praise; in *Prisoner of Azkaban* it was the Time-Turner and the Weasley Whereabouts clock, and many reviewers noted the overall complexity of the plot and the interesting use of time travel. A *New York Times* reviewer called it "maybe the best Harry Potter book yet." And writing in *The New York Review of Books*, fiction writer Alison Lurie declares Harry's story "a metaphor for the power of childhood: of imagination, of creativity, and of humor."

At the time of Philip Hensher's and William Safire's articles, *Goblet of Fire* was at the top of Amazon.com's sales list—although it would not be published for nearly seven more months. It was released on July 8, 2000, ushering in the era of simultaneous UK/US release and the midnight bookstore experience. Soon thereafter, two heavyweight US literary scholars weighed in—one to express reservations about the Harry Potter craze and the other to express outright scorn. The former is (now retired) German professor Jack Zipes, also a prominent expert on fairy tales, and the latter is the dean of contemporary American literary criticism, Harold Bloom.

In April 2000, during an interview about other subjects, Jack Zipes made "a passing remark" to a Minnesota newspaper reporter that he found the Harry Potter books "formulaic and sexist." During a public radio talk show soon thereafter, he was "aggressively attacked by 90 percent of the callers (all adults) for demeaning J. K. Rowling's works" (Zipes, Lecture). In *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, Zipes writes that although most readers appeared "mesmerized" by the series, he is "aware of a minority of professional critics who have misgivings about the quality of the Harry Potter books" (171). Zipes' perception of the books' "formulaic" nature is illustrated in his comment that "one dimensional characters are planted in each one of the novels to circle around Harry with his phallic wand and

to function in a way that will highlight his extraordinary role as Boy Scout/detective” (Zipes, *Sticks* 180). Ultimately, he finds that Rowling “remains within the happy-ending school of fairy-tale writers” (182). Despite these examples of what he perceives to be the series’ conventionality, Zipes spends most of his time exploring the difficulty of assessing literary merit in the case of a commercial phenomenon as huge as Harry Potter. Zipes perceives the series as more a commodity than a literary achievement, although he does issue a call for literary experts to “pierce the phenomenon” and figure out “why such a conventional work of fantasy has been fetishized, so that all sorts of magical powers are attributed to the very act of reading these works” (172). Although Zipes does not explore in detail his comments about the conventional or formulaic aspects of Rowling’s work, his stature as a scholarly luminary undoubtedly influenced other children’s literature experts.

Fourteen years later, in an address before students and faculty in the graduate programs in children’s literature at Hollins University in Virginia, Zipes expressed surprise that the books continue to be popular and reiterated his contention that Rowling “has had to comply with the conventions of the culture industry.” He said he continued to feel that the books “do not have inherent meaning,” but instead have had meaning bestowed upon them. However, he did appear to soften his position slightly; the series had only appeared through *Goblet of Fire* at the time *Sticks and Stones* was published, and Zipes conceded that he had not noticed then how the Harry Potter stories “hark back to stories about sorcerers and magicians noted and written down” all the way back to the Greco-Roman period. These stories touch on “core human dispositions” and conventional ideas, such as that good and dark magic “are two sides of the same coin.” The success of such a hero, Zipes said, depends entirely on whether he willingly shares his magic to help the world or whether he reserves it for his own gain. By that measure, he acknowledged, Harry would be considered a successful—if still conventional—hero.

Responding, in July 2000, to the publication of *Goblet of Fire* as well as the *New York Times*’ establishment of a Children’s